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**Gendered Dimensions of Rooted identity in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies***

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**Aparna Bajpai**Research Scholar, Department of English & M.E.L., University of Allahabad, Prayagraj,  
U.P. (211002)

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**Article Received:** 20/03/2025**Article Accepted:** 27/04/2025**Published Online:** 29/04/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.735

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**Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the leading writers of India who won the 54th Jnanpith Award in 2018, India's highest literary honour. Most of the novels of Amitav Ghosh use a complex narrative strategy to penetrate the personal and national identities of the characters of the novels. He wrote fictional and non-fictional works by using the themes of colonialism and climate change. Nature and farming played an essential role in his writings. He portrayed nature as a leading figure in his writings. Ibis is a trilogy of historical fictions consisting of the novels *Sea of Poppies*(2008), *River of Smoke*(2011) and *Flood of Fire*(2015). This trilogy is a work of post colonial literature. The story of this trilogy revolves around the trade of opium between India and China and the heinous trafficking of girmitiyas to Mauritius, a crown colony of the south east coast of Africa. The name of the trilogy is based on a schooner slave ship named Ibis , which was rebuilt and renovated for the purpose of transporting opium and girmitiyas. The novels of Amitav Ghosh depict a range of characters from different cultures, social status and genders.

**Keywords:** Identity, Subaltern, Subjugation, Commodified-Personality, Marginalization.

*Sea of Poppies*, the first book of Ibis trilogy, talks about the struggle of women in Indian society. It briefly unveils each and every woman character throughout the novel. Deeti, an ordinary village woman, is the main focus of the story. As she was a woman, she suffered from gender bias since her childhood. Her marriage with Hukam Singh was fixed without her consent. Her groom was the fellow sepoy with her brother. She got married to Hukam Singh who was a crippled worker in Ghazipur opium factory. He had been wounded in the leg while serving as a sepoy in the British army. Ghosh portrayed inequality between men and women by the characters of Deeti and others as Paulette, Sarju, Heeru and Munia. The story of the novel presents a crystal clear picture of the subjugation of women. This novel of the Ibis Trilogy mainly investigates the smooth construction of identity from the different

villages of India to Mauritius. Each character of the novel has different shades of identity and they try to cope up with their dilemma throughout the novel. The protagonist of the novel Deeti tries to transform herself internally and externally because her personality was shaped by her familial background. Her thought-process was deeply tied to her familial roots and also to her experiences which she earned from childhood till her adolescence.

Women in ancient India held a respectable position in society. During the Vedic period women had equal status and rights as men. They were not treated inferior to men. But during the medieval period women were forced to follow the practice of polygamy, purdah-system and dowry system which deteriorated the status of women in the society. They were forced to burn themselves with the dead body of their husband in the name of the practice of being Sati. Medieval society of India seems patriarchal, feudal and anti-feminist in nature. The story of the novel shows how women possess the most awful conditions in society even though they were the essential part of it. In early pages of the novel the following line is very crucial to understand the plight of women: “the sand was hot enough to sting the soles of their bare feet” (Ghosh 7). This aforementioned line metaphorically told about the worse condition of women as well as about their hard working nature. Kabutri, daughter of Deeti is engaged in daily chaos of the house and this reflects that the subordinated and subjugated life will continue from one generation to the other generation. Deeti had to work hard in the field to deliver the whole harvest to the opium factory all alone. Hukam Singh was bedridden after an accident in the factory so Deeti had to work by herself. She represents herself as a strong woman who is ready to face everything in her life. Nawal El Saadawi talks about women in her book *Women at Point Zero*: “Women in most countries have not achieved much because they can’t be liberated under the patriarchal, capitalist, imperialist and military system that determine the way we live now, and which is governed by power, not justice, by false democracy not real freedom” (23).

Indian social, political and economical systems are under the influence of patriarchal set up. In *Sea of Poppies* women are dominated by the male members of their family who have complete control over their values, morals, dreams and desires. Women are portrayed as mere puppets; they are not allowed to take decisions of their own life. Their dreams are bound either to the dreams of their father, brother or husband. Deeti is a rebellious woman who has a desire to resist authority or any control and she raised her voice against the conventions of patriarchal society. Her husband is also a part of this patriarchal, chauvinist and male dominated society. She was forced by her brother to marry him as her brother said that “her prospective husband’s disability was a minor one” (Ghosh 31). She is portrayed in this novel as a victim or a commodity who doesn’t have her own choice and she is supposed to surrender her wishes and dreams at the altar of patriarchy. She could not resist her marriage with Hukam Singh and her silent subjugation or subordination show the miserable and

pitiable condition of women in society. Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work *The Second Sex* remarks “Woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (445).

Further on the condition of the married women, Beauvoir averses “marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society.” She continues “one is not born but rather becomes a woman” (445). The depiction of the marriage of the Deeti and Hukam Singh seems as if a crime is happening. Their marriage seems a sacrificial ceremony in which one has to surrender so that the other could win. Although in Indian religion marriage is considered as a pure bond of two souls. Some women advised Deeti to show some protest at first night. As her sister also teases her that “make it hard for him the first time or he’ll give you no peace later; fight and scratch and don’t let him touch your breasts” (Ghosh 32). Here the use of words like ‘fight’ and ‘scratch’ are used to portray first night as a battle. Then again the following lines of the text depict the tormenting condition of Deeti e.g. “when the door opened to admit Hukam Singh, she was sitting coiled on the bed, fully prepared for an assault” (Ghosh 33).

After some time of marriage Deeti accepted such treatment in the name of her fate. As she doesn’t have any place to go, she completely submitted herself to her husband and on the broader level to this patriarchal community. The portrayal of the suffering of Deeti during the first night shows us the real condition of women in India throughout the different periods. This event shows the heinous reality of society. Marriage and motherhood are considered as an essential part of a woman’s life. Deeti was raped by her brother-in-law as her husband was unconscious after the consumption of opium. She got pregnant and gave birth to a daughter and named her Kabutri. Her husband and mother-in-law were expecting a boy as the boy was assumed as an heir by the family. They were very angry at Deeti as she gave birth to a daughter. Deeti was not aware about her rape as she was unconscious because of opium given by her husband. But her mother-in-law was a part of this heinous crime so she started calling her “Draupadi” during the conversation. After sometime Deeti completely discovers everything about that night as her brother -in-law Chandan Singh told her everything near her bedridden husband:

He cornered her inside the very room where her husband was lying supine on his bed. Listen to me, Kabutri-ki-ma, he said. You know very well how your daughter was conceived-why pretend? You know that you would be childless today if not for me. Be quite, she cried. I won’t listen to another word. It’s only the truth. He nodded dismissively at his brother’s bed. He couldn’t have done it then anymore than he can now. It was me; no one else. And that is why I say to you:

wouldn't it be best for you to do willingly now what you did before without your knowledge. Your husband and I are brothers after all, of the same flesh and blood. Where is the shame? Why should you waste your looks and your youth on a man who cannot enjoy them? Besides, the time is short while your husband is still alive-if you conceive a son while he is still living, he will be his father's rightful heir. (Ghosh 157)

Here Chandan Singh is shown as a symbol of patriarchy or a colonizer and Deeti as a colonised and commodified Indian woman:

Although he had never before shown any interest in Hukam Singh's condition, he now began to insist on his right to enter the house in order to sit beside his brother's bed. But once past the door, he paid no attention to his brother and had eyes only for Deeti: ever as he was entering he would brush his hand against her thigh. Sitting on his brother's bed, he would look at her and fondle himself through the folds of his dhoti; when Deeti knelt to feed Hukam Singh, he would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees and elbows. His advances became so aggressive that Deeti took to hiding a small knife in the folds of her sari, fearing that he might attack her, right on her husband's bed. (Ghosh 156-157)

Chandan Singh wants to seduce and rape Deeti as he was aware of his brother's condition very well. He threatens Deeti that nobody is going to help her after her husband's demise. He frightens her so much that she starts thinking about being Sati with her husband on his pyre to protect her honour. He puts her innocent life in serious jeopardy. Hukam Singh considered Deeti as a fertile land who can give him a male heir but she was failed in it. Chandan wants to rape her and he even considered it as a favour on her. As Spivak remarks: "the woman giving pleasure, without the usual affective charge, as use value, in need, in patriarchal society" (182). Deeti won't be allowed to have her husband's property as her daughter is not considered as an heir. She doesn't even have any share in her father's property too. After analysing all the possibilities after her husband's death, she plans to die with her husband as Sati in case no option or alternative left for her. Deeti imagines: "Better by far to die a celebrated death than to be dependent on Chandan Singh, or even to return to her own village, to live out her days as a shameful burden on her brother and her kin" (Ghosh 158).

It is completely visible that the choice of being a Sati was indirectly imposed on her by the responsible dominating group. She was not left with any option. After the death of her husband, Deeti was dragged to pyre unconsciously. Kalua was aware about the condition of Deeti and here Sati in the novel is shown from the point of view of Kalua:

Kalua saw that it was headed by Deeti, in a resplendent white sari – except

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that she was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own feet, much less walk, had she not been supported by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, and several others. Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband's corpse. Now there was an outbreak of chanting as heaps of kindling were piled around her, and doused with ghee and oil to ready them for the fire. (Ghosh 177)

The whole episode shows the domination of male's rule and regulations on female. Deeti was not ready for her sacrifice so she was dragged by her brother-in-law. Spivak explains sati system in her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?': "The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be sati. The early colonial British transcribed it Sutte" (93).

Spivak uses the practice of sati as a self-immolation of a widow to illustrate how the subaltern woman is silenced by both colonial power and native patriarchy. The British colonizers justified their intervention by saying they were "saving brown women from brown men", portraying themselves as civilizing heroes. At the same time, traditional Indian patriarchy saw sati as a sacred duty or honourable act for a widow, denying her individual choice. Spivak argues that in both narratives, the actual voice of the woman is missing-she cannot speak for herself. Her death is spoken about, but not by her. The central critique is that subaltern women are represented but never heard, making their agency invisible within dominant discourses. In a nutshell Spivak talks about the old practice of sati, where a widow would burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. She uses this example to make a deeper point about how women from marginalized backgrounds are often not allowed to speak for themselves-they are spoken about by others, but their own voices are missing.

She explains that during British rule in India the British claimed they were helping by saving Indian women from Indian men. At the same time, many traditional and orthodox Indian people defended sati, saying it was part of the culture or a religious duty. In both cases, no one really asked what the woman wanted. Her choice, her voice, and her experience were ignored. Whether it was the colonizers or Indian society, both sides made her invisible in their own way. Spivak's bigger message is that when powerful people control the narrative-whether it's the government, intellectuals, or culture-the 'subaltern woman' (a woman from a powerless or oppressed group) is silenced. Even when everyone is talking about her, she isn't really being heard. Many modern Indian writers considered the sati

system as a murder of a widow woman as in many cases women were totally unaware of this heinous act i.e. that they were completely ignorant and unable to realize what was happening with them. They were killed without any logical reason. Deeti was a victim of this patriarchal system in which she couldn't live as her husband was no more. According to Spivak, 'sati' is an oppressive term and instrument which was used by the male dominated society in order to limit freedom of women after their husband's death. Women were treated like slaves by the society who didn't have the right to live after her husband's demise. The equality of women is a myth because they are treated as inferior to men in all the aspects of life. The payment of women's labour was less than that of men's labour. Deeti and other women like Elokeshi are the visible example of it.

Deeti drugged her mother-in-law to know the truth of her rape and one day under the influence of opium she told everything about that night. Deeti know how to use opium as a weapon for truth:

Next morning Deeti mixed a little trace of opium into her mother-in-law's sweetened milk... from that day on she began to slip traces of the drug into everything she served her mother-in-law; she sprinkled it on her achars, kneaded it into her dalpuris, fried it into her pakoras and dissolved it in her dal...As for Deeti, the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance ! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys-for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize the kingdoms and control multitudes? And surely this could not be the only such substance upon the earth? (Ghosh 38)

In the *Sea of Poppies*, everything is under the control of British forces. They forced Deeti along with other farmers to grow more and more poppies to deliver to an English opium factory. Superiority of the colonizers and inferiority of the colonized are quite visible in all the episodes of the novel. From the beginning of the novel it becomes very clear that Deeti is a victim of patriarchy but as the story continues she starts retaliating with the situation. She is not a passive sufferer as she knows how to fight her own battle. She is the leader of

her

own life as she takes command of her life after her marriage with Kalua and continues this attitude till the end of the story . She teaches other women to stand for themselves during their journey on Ibis. During the pregnancy when she came to know about the truth of her rape when she drugged her mother-in-law. The following citation from the text depicts it:

It was a decoction of datura that wrung the truth from the old woman,  
by sending her into a trance from which she never recovered.  
In her last days, when her mind was wandering she often referred  
to Deeti as ‘Draupadi’; when asked why, she would murmur drowsily:  
Because the earth has never seen a more virtuous woman than  
Draupadi, of the Mahabharata, wife to five brothers...it was this  
allusion that confirmed Deeti’s belief that the child in her belly  
had been fathered not by her husband but by Chandan Singh.( Ghosh 38-39)

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